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A new way to treat drug users

BRINGING PATIENTS TO CLINICS: Government shifts focus to decriminalising drugs

MALAYSIA is moving towards decriminalising drugs to make it easier for drug users to seek treatment and rehabilitation.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Nancy Shukri said the government's policy had shifted more to treating drug users than prosecuting them.

She said Asean's goal to be a drug-free region by 2015 was not realistic, but noted that a change in approach by the authorities could reduce the number of addicts.

"Instead of looking at drug dependants as criminals, we should look at them as patients. Instead of putting them in jail, we bring them to a clinic," she said after attending the High-Level Panel Meeting on Drug Policy and Public Health organised by the Global Commission on Drug here, yesterday.

The meeting was held in conjunction with the 7th International AIDS Society (IAS) Conference 2013 on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention here.

Nancy said Malaysia had good policies in treating drug users, but they were not publicly known. Among the initiatives, she said, was the needle-exchange programme for drug users introduced in 2006, which today had seen a reduction of HIV/AIDS infection among intravenous drug users.

"Others include the harm-reduction programme and upgrading of the rehabilitation centres into 'Cure & Care Clinics'.

"We are there (decriminalising drugs) but we are not making it loud enough for the people to understand that we have this policy. Our policy has not been established in a formal way."

Nancy said the government was reviewing laws related to drugs, including the Drug Dependants (Treatment and Rehabilitation) Act 1983.

"The Law Reform Committee is discussing amendments to that provision (Section 4(1)(b) of the act, which allows for the detention of a suspected drug dependant for up to 14 days for a test to be conducted."

At the opening session of the conference, Health Minister Datuk Seri Dr S. Subramaniam said Malaysia had turned the tide on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, having halved the number of newly reported cases compared with a decade ago.

He said various measures by the government and stakeholders had contributed to the decrease.

At the end of last year, Malaysia reported 98,279 HIV cases while the number of reported people living with HIV was about 82,000.

"The country has been experiencing a consistent downward trend in the annual rate of new HIV cases, from its highest rate of 28.5 per 100,000 population in 2002 to 11.7 per 100,000 population in 2012." **Bernama**



Minister in the Prime Minister's Department **Nancy Shukri** says Malaysia's drug rehabilitation programmes are not well known